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Coyote Politics: Trickster Tales and Feminist Futures

SHANE PHELAN

This essay is a first attempt at thinking through the ways in which Native American Coyote stories can illuminate options for lesbian and feminist politics. I follow the metaphors of trickery and shape-shifting common to the stories and recommend the laughter they evoke as we engage in feminist politics and philosophy.

When you're trying to write about tricksters
And you go downstairs at 6 A.M.
and see Coyote padding up the road,
don't think it's a good sign.
He's not there to inspire you.
Later that day, someone might steal your hubcaps.
You might not write another line that week.
Then you'll remember:
Coyote the trickster, right?
Coyote, the thief.
(Bright 1993, xviii)

Author's Note: This paper is a first attempt at thinking through the ways in which Coyote stories can illuminate options for lesbian and feminist politics. It contains arguments, but it is not an argument. It is rather an effort to follow the metaphors of trickery and shape-shifting presented in Coyote stories and to recommend the laughter they evoke as we engage in feminist politics and philosophy. It is also an attempt to write with the energy that Coyote stories bring to life. I am therefore not yet "endorsing" positions that seem to be latent in Coyote stories; I do not yet clearly know what those positions are, or whether the positions I describe are the best lessons to be read

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from the stories. I write this out of the peculiar resonant presence of Coyote in my Euro-American life, a risky energy that I do not yet understand or know how to value.

Nonetheless, there are ideas advanced in this piece. Coyote stories challenge ideas of identity as they present a being with the ability to shape-shift, to embody aspects of other beings while remaining "itself." They suggest a world in which caution and care are called for, in which we cannot assume that we know who is who or what is what. The consequences of this are several. First we cannot presume that "commonsense" ideas about identities or political affiliations are accurate. Our certainties may turn out to be the means by which we are subjugated. Second, feminists may gain from challenging traditional notions of moral action in politics, looking for avenues for creative trickery rather than resolute moral clarity and integrity.

Coyote stories diverge from Euro-American modern theory most in their evocation of a world where "excessive" desire, greed, lust, arrogance, and other "vices" produce humor, where we can laugh at rather than fear these qualities, where these qualities contribute to a full portrait of humanity not as fallen from grace but as bumbling and blessed. I don't know yet what feminist politics might look like in such a world, but this essay aims to open the project of thinking that through.

I had a dream one day. (I was awake, but that's another story.) In the dream, I was about six years old. I was sitting in a room on the top floor of an old house. I had locked the door to the room and sat there alone, frozen in grief and fear. I, the adult spectator, knew I needed to help the little girl who was myself. But how? I thought of having someone get me to open the door, but there was no one I would trust. And then a coyote appeared.

I don't know why it was a coyote—it just was. The coyote called to me to open the door. I couldn't walk; I had to drag myself to the door. When I opened the door, the coyote helped me back to the couch I had been sitting on. He began to talk, not very seriously, but in a friendly way. Did I want to play? he asked. I didn't know what that meant, but I knew I couldn't move. Eventually I moved enough to fall to the floor. He massaged my legs, and as the tiniest bit of feeling came into them, I began to cry. I sobbed for my life, for my pain, for my fear of living. When grief turned into anger, the coyote wrapped me in layers of cotton so that I could hit the floor and scream without hurting myself. Slowly, as I became able to move, he helped me look around the room, find things to play with, dance a little. He never asked me why I hurt so much, and he never fussed over me; instead, he distracted me. That coyote distracted me

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into health. As we left the house, my father appeared and tried to hurt me, but the coyote protected me. Clearly this was a being of power, but his power was not just in his size or strength. His power lay also in his lightheartedness, his ability to take things as they came, without the burden of past or future.

I still don't know why it was a coyote that appeared that day. I hadn't read Coyote stories at that point, nor had I yet read the evocations of Coyote in the work of Donna Haraway or Gerald Vizenor (Haraway 1991, 199; Vizenor 1988). Nor had I read about other trickster figures. But as I did, I found that my dream coincided with the stories of many tribes of the western United States. In those stories, Old Man Coyote is the trickster, the unreliable one who waits to make fools of the serious and self-important. In many stories, he sounds malicious. He is both fool and shaman, a powerful buffoon.

As I thought about what Coyote taught me, I saw why Haraway, Vizenor, and many others have linked postmodernism to the Coyote figure. As Vizenor notes, "The trickster narrative arises in agonistic imagination; a wild venture in communal discourse, an uncertain humor that denies aestheticism, translation, and imposed representations" (1988, x). At its best, postmodernist theory is coyote theory, and the strength of postmodernist political theory is its coyoteness. It is also the source of much of the anxiety generated by postmodernism; agonistic, uncertain, continually refusing closure, postmodernist writers seem to defy the commands of "civilization" itself. It is this strength and that anxiety that I elaborate on here. Specifically, I explore the ways in which Coyote can refresh lesbian and feminist politics by offering us a less stable understanding of identity and a looser and lighter, and therefore more empowering, interpretation of the political cosmos and human action. This empowerment, however, carries with it certain responsibilities that cannot be neatly encompassed by ethical precepts. It thus brings not only laughter, but also awe and fear.

In the sections that follow I focus on particular attributes of Coyote in order to consider challenges to those who believe in and practice democratic identity politics. I address different audiences in each section, but I invite readers to write themselves into these audiences, to see whether Coyote's lessons do not also apply to others than those I describe.

Stealing Tricksters

Some Native American (and, indeed, non-Native American) feminists might object to my use and appropriation of Coyote stories, arguing that such use distorts the stories and cannibalizes their cultures. The problem of appropriation is an acute one, capable of great damage to feminist solidarity.[1] In particular, trickster stories confound the ground of appropriation as they call into question notions of identity and property. Whatever may be said for any

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other cultural narratives, trickster stories are hard to appropriate because they are hard to own.

The lessons of tricksters are not exclusively Native American. Many European and non-European cultures such as those of ancient Greece, Africa, the Middle East, Japan, and China have trickster figures (Radin [1956] 1972, xxiii; Williams 1979). The medieval European figure of Mercurius functioned as a shape-shifting trickster. Trickster images were destroyed or submerged in countries overrun by Protestant rationalism but continue to flourish around the world (Williams 1979). Given this history of global appearances and specific cultural erasure, requiring Euro-American feminists to find such lessons and figures in European history is to force them more tightly into the pathologies of modernity.

Further, such a requirement denies Coyote's own wisdom (and that of other tricksters) by participating in the rationalism that is killing us. By insisting that identities be kept clear and unambiguous, that cultures remain distinct, and that individuals fit within one culture at a time, such critics would deny the chaos that is Coyote's home. They would deny Coyote not only to others but also to themselves by policing the boundaries of identity and culture too tightly. Gerald Vizenor has described this policing, and he argues that "postmodernism liberates imagination and widens the audiences for tribal literatures" (Vizenor 1993, 6), inviting a "pleasurable misreading" (5). Coyote stories form a trickster discourse precisely because they exceed the lines of property and propriety.

Thus the question is not whether to dialogue with Coyote, but how. Learning some much-needed lessons from people who still know them is not the same thing as claiming to become Native American. I do not claim here to know the "truth" of Coyote stories. I do not claim that my use of Coyote is in fact consonant with any Native American understanding. Rather, I claim a truth, a use, that can enlarge the possibilities of feminist politics. I believe, too, that an elaboration of Coyote politics will move us beyond celebratory gestures to a real concern for the ethical and political challenges presented if we "see feminist theory as a reinvented coyote discourse" (Haraway 1991, 199). Coyote is a figure fraught with danger as well as laughter. Not only does a coyote politics mean that "we give up mastery but keep searching for fidelity, knowing all the while we will be hoodwinked" (Haraway 1991, 199); it also means taking responsibility for the possibility that we will be the hoodwinkers.

Trickster Figures

The oral literature of Native North American peoples is dominated by beings such as Frog, Raven, Bear, Dog, and Spider. These beings are not the animals that we now call by these names. They are First People, who provided patterns for humans and the animals with whom they would share the world.

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The First People created and prepared the world that humans now inhabit, and when humans came into being, the First People became the animals that we now recognize by their names (Bright 1993, xi).

Within this literature, the trickster figure assumes a central place. Virtually all Native American peoples, and many others around the globe, have a trickster, although the being who carries those features varies; Blue Jay, Dragonfly, Raccoon, Hare, Raven, and Spider share with Coyote that honor, as do other beings that are not clearly (proto-)animal (Blaeser 1993, 47). Among the Winnebago, Wakdjunkaga resembles a man, although that resemblance is incomplete and unspecified (Radin [1956] 1972).

Tricksters are not beautiful or graceful; whatever their (proto)species, they are usually disproportioned or ugly, and clumsy. They are not beings to look up to, but to laugh at and learn from. Still, they are not to be dismissed. They usually have special powers that enable them to perform their deceptions and their achievements. Tricksters are uniquely complex, ambivalent creatures, equaled only by humans in their multiplicity, grandiosity, and desire. In many tales Coyote is charged with bringing about the transformation of First People into their contemporary animals, basically domesticating them to make the world safe for humans. There are several stories that explain the traits of animals and people by describing encounters between First People and Coyote; an Okanogan story describes the domestication of horses and dogs, as well as the extended dependence of human children as the result of Coyote's triumph over Horse and Dog, aggressive and powerful ancestors of contemporary animals (Mourning Dove [1933] 1990, 41-48).

Although tricksters come in many forms both in the United States and around the world, Coyote dominates southwestern North America. Further, it is Coyote who has resonated with the imagination of many English-speaking writers. William Bright suggests that this resonance is due to the connection between the behavior of today's coyote (*canis latrans*) and the character of Old Man Coyote, and also to the power of Coyote to evoke western North America as a distinct place. More than any other animal, the coyote embodies the deserts and plains of the West. The coyote's adaptability has enabled it to flourish when its larger and more specialized relative, the wolf, has been driven almost to extinction. This survival has been due not to the superior strength of the coyote, however, and it has only recently led to "respect" among whites. The wolf remains a compelling image of strength and beauty (even as actual wolves are driven to extinction), but the coyote is scorned as a carrion-eater, an ignoble slouching unkempt canid. The coyote's range, however, is growing into the eastern United States, north to Alaska, and into cities. The coyote is scorned as a pest, but it survives.

Thus the coyote provides an ideal animal for trickster tales. Tricksters are noted for their ability to die and then show up again; even dismemberment and decomposition do not spell the end. As Jarold Ramsey puts it, tricksters are

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"mythic survivors, 'hot for the world'. . . in a way that signifies, *per speculum mentis*, both the persistence in us of the unreconstructed Id, and the sheer avid amoral persistence of the human race itself" (Ramsey 1993, 37). Coyotes do look to many, however, as though they had gone through dismemberment or destruction. Explaining the coyote's unimpressive coat, Simon Ortiz writes that Coyote had a beautiful coat, but he lost it gambling. Some mice saw him shivering and felt sorry for him, so they found scraps of fur and glued them on with piñon pitch (Ortiz 1993; Silko 1981).

Tricksters do not triumph or create because of virtue, reason, or beauty. The strength of tricksters is the opposite of classical or "Apollonian" hero/as; they win by the use of cunning, deceit, and unique powers. Although they are powerful, often considered responsible for the creation of the world that humans live in, tricksters are not credited with a divine plan or many of the attributes of the Judeo-Christian deity. As John Roberts describes African American tricksters, they exemplify "a recursive, rather than a linear, process of endlessly devising solutions to both old and new problems of how to live under ever-changing social, political, and economic conditions" (Roberts 1989, 11).

Finally, tricksters can adopt the shape of other beings for camouflage or to get what they want, though some people recognize or suspect tricksters despite their disguises. Coyote may appear as a human, another animal, or even an object such as driftwood when it serves his purposes. This attribute facilitates deceit and contributes to Coyote's bad reputation, but it serves to remind us that things are not always as they seem.

I wish now to address these features of Coyote—shape-shifting, sneakiness, and survival—in turn through examinations of sexual identity, feminist strategy, masculinity, and the status of the world. Coyote cannot simply be celebrated as a metaphor for postmodernism; he deserves examination in his own right, and this examination reveals potentially disturbing elements that must be dealt with (though never tamed).

Lesbian Coyotes

Discussion of lesbian politics has largely been dominated by metaphors of location. These discussions by and large do not challenge conceptions of who a lesbian is. Rather they describe the *position* of lesbians, and that position is dominated by metaphors of inside and outside: as insiders or outsiders in "society," in or out of closets. Lesbian feminism has provided a more sophisticated treatment of lesbian identity, removing it from medical models and heterosexual presumptions of "inversion" and "gender dysphoria" and relocating it within a shared world of women.and resistance to oppression. The fact that many women describe their process of becoming lesbian as one of choice and self-transformation rather than discovery contributes to this shift. Still,

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the metaphors are strongly spatial: lesbians are often described as "outsiders" or "marginal" members of cultures and societies, and the notion of a "lesbian community" constantly refers to spatial images (who is in this community? where does it manifest itself? what is its relation to the "larger" community?).

The spatial metaphor of "coming out" persists in the implication that becoming lesbian is a matter of discovery and revelation of a hidden truth; the first time one comes out, it is to oneself. Later comings-out are revelations to others, while becoming straight can only be interpreted as reversion to what one always "really" was or a return to the closet and the privileges of heterosexuality.

Discussions of lesbian identity have moved from these accounts to more complex narratives of lesbian "becoming" (Butler 1990; Martin 1992; Phelan 1993). These newer descriptions stress the ways in which lesbianism is not an action that some people (want to) do and others don't, or a state of being that some participate in more fully than others, but rather is a process of identity formation and location that is never closed and complete. Lesbians are shape-shifters in this first sense, that many if not most slide between "being straight" and "being lesbian" at least once in their lives.

It could be objected that Coyote's shape-shifting is not in fact analogous, in that Coyote remains Coyote whatever his shape. This is a complex problem indeed; if Coyote changes himself to a piece of driftwood (Reuben 1993), in what sense is he still Coyote? He may float; we can pick him up and throw him; and possibly we can carve him. His Coyoteness lies not in his not being wood, but in his ability to assume the shape of Coyote or any other thing at will. It is not what he is but what he can do that defines Coyote.

If we follow this analogy, then, lesbians "are" lesbians whatever their appearances or practices. They are lesbians because they have the capacity to assume the shape of lesbians or not at will. In that case, are all women lesbians? Perhaps not all women have that capacity; but certainly such a definition broadens the field of lesbians far beyond those who would identify themselves, or be identified by others, as such. This was the strategy adopted by Adrienne Rich in 1980, when she argued for a "lesbian continuum" that encompasses not only self-identified sexual lesbians, but all those women whose primary love for other women or resistance to male domination makes them participants in a culture of resistance to "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich 1980). This is a shape-shifting world indeed.

Still, Rich's geography of lesbianism does not do justice to Coyote. It attempts to fix lesbianism and lesbian identity, however broadly. The definitions still provide the basis for answering the question: Is she "really" a lesbian? In a coyote world, each lesbian is what she is. We may of course say that any being that is a lesbian necessarily includes lesbianism in her list of attributes, but that is nothing more than a semantic move. It does not guarantee that

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lesbianism itself has a fixed meaning throughout one's life. Attributing essence (or even stability) to such a characteristic is a shield behind which Coyote baffles us with world changes.

The confusion here is a result of failing properly to name the lesbian. The analogy to Coyote's situation is rather like this: a woman, let's call her Max, grows up to act like a model of a (heterosexual) woman. She experiences her self, her life, and her desire as such. Then, at age 30, Max feels a shift in her desire. She desires intimacy, and perhaps sex, with a woman. She comes to call herself a lesbian. Or, alternatively, Max's self changes so that she adopts a butch persona, violating heterosexual norms of womanhood though she still feels sexual desire only for men. She does not identify as a lesbian, but others identify her as such. Or perhaps Max makes a reasoned choice; she decides that while men are the object of her desire, that desire betrays other desires to live as an equal among equals, to receive respect and mutuality, or to give her energy primarily to women. At this point Max adopts a lesbian identity, and that identity is recognized by others. The question before us is: Is Max still Max?

Thinking of the question of lesbian shape-shifting in terms of "Is a lesbian still a lesbian?" is deceptive in that it uses a descriptive term where Coyote is a proper name. To see Coyote in lesbians, we need to ask about persons such as Max. No doubt most people would say that of course Max is still Max, that Max has simply discovered something in herself, or made a decision. We would not say that Max is no longer herself (though indeed some would, and would recommend involuntary hospitalization to "enable" her to return to herself). Max is herself, but she may be virtually unrecognizable to those who have known her previously. This capacity to negotiate change, to allow fluidity while imposing order, is a Coyote quality. Coyote's very tricksterness prevents us from saying that he is only "really" himself when he is acting one way, for Coyote embodies all the impulses of people and animals. Coyote is not simply rapacious; Coyote also saves children from death at the hands of others, brings fire to humans who need it, and acts in other benevolent ways. Coyote's power lies partly in his ability to be other things as well as those things are themselves; when Coyote turns himself into driftwood, he *is* driftwood even as he is Coyote. And indeed, when lesbians are not lesbians they can be not-lesbians as well as anyone else. Coyote challenges languages of essence and accident, appearance and reality, and in so doing provides a welcome relief from the need to "get to the bottom of things."

Thus Coyote thinking provides an avenue into current discussions of bisexuality and the place of bisexuals in lesbian and gay communities. Some would call Max bisexual. Others would not; they would suggest that until she feels and acts on her desire for women she is simply "in denial." If Max does become lesbian and then desires men, or changes her persona again, or chooses to drop her lesbian affiliation, many people now would call her bisexual. By this they

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usually mean that her earlier personas of lesbian or heterosexual were mistaken—she was "really" a bisexual all along! Bisexuality has become one way of containing the increasingly visible flux in many people's sexuality. We might be tempted to say that a lesbian who sleeps with men is "really" bisexual, and to naturalize this category as lesbianism and homosexuality have been naturalized. But this is a betrayal of Coyote and invites his laughter. Confident of her new knowledge and her new true identity Max sits contentedly, until Coyote, like Socrates, asks innocently: What is bisexuality? Who has it? How do you know? What's the difference between a bisexual and a lesbian who hasn't found the right man yet? Aren't we all "really" bisexual? How much desire do you have to feel for someone of each sex to count as bisexual? Are you a 60/40 bisexual, or a 30/70 one? Each question drags Max further into confusion, as she tries to impose order beyond her capacity to do so. Finally, if she can't learn Coyote humor, she will order Coyote away and label him a public nuisance.

With all this said, the objection is not completely off track. It leads us to the second sense in which lesbians are shape-shifters. Lesbians may indeed appear as not-lesbians for their own purposes without ceasing to be lesbians. Even lesbians who experience themselves as "innately" lesbian, who have never felt desire for a man and whose earliest sexual impulses were toward women, may often be taken for heterosexual by others. For fems, this is the result of the hetero/sexist presumption that women of "normal" (i.e., feminine) appearance must be heterosexual (a presumption shared by many lesbians).[2] But even butches can sometimes present themselves as "normal," and many women who don't identify as butch or femme can slide back and forth with ease. Here the shape-shifting is the product not of some unique facility of lesbians, but of the rigidity of social codes that make lesbians invisible unless they are conforming to dominant stereotypes. It is in Coyote's "nature" to appear as not-Coyote when it suits his purposes. Some may recognize, or suspect, Coyote when he is transformed, but Coyote has the ability to fool most people and to get his way. Coyote uses our own expectations to slip under our radar.

One implication of this analogy might be that lesbians can gain power from sneakiness and subterfuge, from masking themselves. This possibility is in direct opposition to contemporary strategies that urge gays and lesbians to come out wherever possible. The command to come out has two arguments to support it. The first is practical; the more people see real live queers, the more they overcome their fears and stereotypes. The second argument is moral (even though it is often presented as practical): this is the argument for a life of integrity, a life without closets and shame and secrecy. In this argument secrecy is treated as pathological, resulting in distortion of the lesbian's psyche and her relations with others. Beneath the psychological argument, however, lurks a moral imperative to present oneself to others, to unify one's life, to become transparent. How, we might ask, can you trust someone who doesn't

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make herself known to you? How can you rely on someone who leaves herself open to blackmail? How can you respect someone who doesn't stand up for her truth no matter the cost? Asking these questions reveals the huge moral investment in making people visible as what they are, in demanding allies for projects that we undertake in the name of a shared good. Such demands, however, quickly become forces of resentment in contemporary identity politics (Brown 1993). As some of us "reveal" ourselves and put ourselves "on the line," there is a temptation to disdain those who do not. Discourses of revelation give shape and force to this dynamic, as lines are drawn between "activists" and "cowards" or "free riders."

Coyote politics may provide a way of validating strategies of subversion that work in ways other than direct confrontation. If we detach from frames of reference that are mired in appearance/reality binarisms and move toward a Coyote world of shifting shapes, we may find other questions to ask. Coyote stories do not order us not to judge goals; sometimes Coyote is doing things we dislike or fear, and other times he is a force of justice or good. As Kimberly Blaeser says, "Not either/or, but either/and: Trickster mediates between supposed contradictory forces or elements by retaining aspects of both, by revealing them to be coexisting parts of one whole, interconnected, often indistinguishable elements of the one. Ambiguity approaches truth in a way that clarity cannot" (Blaeser 1993, 51).

In either case, Coyote's methods are not "honest." Thus I ask: Who cares if Donna Shalala is a dyke?[3] Both the Right and many progressive gays and lesbians have acted as though this is an important question. The Right fears her "corruption" will spread like a virus, and queers hope for legitimacy and access. But these hopes and fears are based on the unitary linkage of sexuality, identity, and politics that is persistently belied in our lives. What matters for coyotes, though, is what game she's playing. Who will get funding, and access, and action? If she came out, would we get more—or less? In a Coyote world, it is well to remember that the "reasonableness" of our plans and expectations does not make their achievement more likely, or as beneficial as we might expect. In a Coyote world good and bad exist, but it is hard to know sometimes which is which.

Feminist Coyotes

If lesbians are shape-shifting coyotes, then so are feminists. "Feminism" is indeed the name of an ever-shifting terrain of debates and perspectives, a fact which is hard to impress on non- or antifeminists. The unity of feminism lies in the commitment to end the oppression of women, but the nature of that oppression and the means of its elimination are matters of dispute. For early radical feminists, women's oppression is separable from the construction of women; for them, oppression is the result of a biological/physiological inequal-

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ity and resultant conquest. More recent treatments of gender as a social structure present the oppression of women as the work of gender. In such work, gender is the operation by which men and women are produced out of the multiplicity of possibilities presented by bodies and minds (Scott 1988; Bornstein 1994). Feminists range from polite liberals to authentic man-haters to gender benders, and promise to continue to do so for some time.

Popular caricatures of feminism include the belief that feminists all think the same way, that there exist "feminist thought police" to enforce an orthodoxy. In response, *Ms.* magazine has inaugurated a crusade to demonstrate our diversity of thought (while hiding the less "presentable" members of the family).[4] Teachers of feminist theory and politics strain to convey adequately the varieties of feminist thought. As a result, both feminists and nonfeminists bemoan the plurality of feminisms. Some feminists worry that our lack of theoretical unity results in political disempowerment, while nonfeminists find the variety of positions bewildering. Opponents of feminism operate by effacing positions other than those they seek to condemn, constructing a monolithic "feminism" as a straw woman. This is a no-win situation; either we are narrow-minded ideologues, or we stand for nothing. Add to this the current debates between "postmodernist" or antifoundationalist thinkers and those who argue that without quasi-transcendental moorings we cannot make a case for justice (Hartsock 1990), and you have a smelly stew worthy of a malevolent god/dess.

It is perhaps easiest to find a coyote response to the modernist qualms. These fears rest on a rationalism that associates power with sovereignty, and sovereignty with univocal reason. Coyote stories, however, teach us that there are many forms of power, and that not all carry with them the prestige or recognition of the sovereign self.

When the Spirit Chief decided to rename the animals in preparation for the coming of humans, Coyote decided to change his name. He determined to be first in line the next day to choose his name, one of the big powerful ones such as Bear or Eagle. He decided to stay up all night in order to be first, but of course he fell asleep. By the time he awoke, all the names but his had been taken. Coyote was crushed by this mishap, but the Spirit Chief told him that he had wanted things this way and in fact had arranged for Coyote's long sleep. Coyote was to be the leader of the animals, in charge of making the world safe for the New People. He was given great power. Still, Coyote's power was combined with foolishness and greediness. He is both powerful and silly, noble and base, wise and stupid (Mourning Dove [1933] 1990, 15-26).

Coyote's power comes not from his superior reason, or virtue, or an empathy that binds him to others. It is something he can call on, and thus control in a certain sense, but its existence is not due to his efforts, and his behavior does not affect it. Coyote's power is author(iz)ed outside of himself, but it is his nonetheless. Further, his power is not a specialized ability, such as the strength

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of Bear or the flying power of Eagle. His Colville-Okanogan name, Sin-ka-lip', Imitator, refers to Coyote's pretense to the power and knowledge of other animals. Coyote, in fact, is the all-purpose animal, the precursor of human beings. Better than none in any particular thing, Coyote gets by on bluffing and posturing as well as cleverness. This pretense makes him the butt of jokes and alienates him from those he imitates, but the Spirit Chief sees a need for such a being.

Coyote's name is left because no one else wants it: "People despise that name." In the age of Rush Limbaugh and Camille Paglia, feminists might gain from thinking about the power of one whose name is despised.[5] The disparity between the many respondents to surveys in the United States who endorse an agenda many feminists consider "feminist" although they deny that they are "feminists" deserves careful consideration. "Feminism" remains a target of derision and antagonism, even as feminist understandings and agendas are extended. The name is reviled, but at least some feminist insights continue to gather support. Does coyote politics mean that we shouldn't care about the difficulties confronting "feminism" if we can get our agenda through? Maybe.

Coyote always gets into trouble when he focuses on saving face, on forcing others to acknowledge his great power and intelligence. He succeeds when he uses his gifts, gifts that Christian thought has deemed ignoble. Coyote's gifts are those denigrated by the Greeks as "clever," sly, deceitful, rather than those of manly directness.[6] Lying, cheating, lurking, desiring—the anti-Semitic stereotype of the Jew, the misogynistic portrait of women, the white racist picture of the non-white. It's understandable that those so pictured would want to deny the truth of those images, for they also live in a culture that holds such features in contempt. But perhaps we shouldn't move so fast. Perhaps sneakiness can be rehabilitated, as Coyote actions.

It may seem at first that this is a replication of Nietzsche's story of the eagles and the sheep in the *Genealogy of Morals* (Nietzsche 1956). In this story, Nietzsche offers animals as First People, representatives of the weak and the strong. The sheep, too weak to defend themselves against eagles, can survive only by convincing the eagles that it is wrong to harm sheep. They use reason to ward off superior force. From the point of view of the eagles, indirect action is ignoble because it is unnecessary. Nietzsche sides with the eagles, and though he offers grudging admiration to the tactics of the weak, he accepts the priority of force over reason. In so doing, he replicates the ambivalent valorization of "nature" over culture that runs throughout European thought (Phelan 1992).

Imagine, however, that Eagle's opponent is not the sheep, but the wily Coyote. We might imagine Eagle's thoughts: "I don't have to lie or cheat to get what I want. I get it by virtue of superior force. This is natural and orderly. That Coyote, though, is another matter. He distracts and confuses me; he wants

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what (I say) he shouldn't have; he refuses to play by the rules." Coyote is no sheep (although he may appear in sheep's clothing). Coyote may use "reasons" as part of his persuasion, but he is just as likely to lie, deceive, or confuse his opponent.

Nietzsche argues that the sheep in fact confuse the eagles with their reasoning, that reason is the weapon of the weak, and to this extent sheep resemble coyotes. The major difference is that, while the sheep deceive themselves as much as the eagles with their talk of reason, Coyote knows exactly what he is doing. To the sheep as well as the eagles, Coyote is a destroyer of order and safety. The sheep believe the eagles when they promise to be good, to refrain from being eagles, and but the sheep may also fear that Coyote will upset the eagles enough that they will break the rules. Sheep also fear Coyote as another predator; eagles can't look like sheep, but Coyote can look like anything, can pose as your friend while he measures you for a meal. Eagles aren't the only thing for sheep to fear.

Coyote doesn't play by the rules, either Eagle's or Sheep's. Coyote's answer to Eagle is not that he does play by the rules, and therefore should be respected; it is that everyone does what they can, with what they have. Eagle is mad because Coyote doesn't play by Eagle rules, but why should Coyote care about that? We might say that he should care because Eagle runs the world of air, and if Coyote wants to get on in it, he should curry Eagle's favor; but Eagle's rules used Eagle's way will never challenge Eagle's privilege. Sometimes Coyote may want to play by Eagle's rules, but only if it serves his purposes. Likewise, Coyote may play Sheep's game, but never with the confidence in the rules that Sheep does. Coyote knows that all games favor someone.

Feminists should celebrate the multiplicity of feminist approaches, some of which play by patriarchal rules and some of which challenge them. We should not have to choose, or exhaust one another by deciding which one set of rules is appropriate for us or even where we are all going. "Feminism" is a name for a movement much larger than any one agenda, any particular item on a laundry list of desired changes. It is a name that encompasses everything from equal pay to sexual revolution to the end of capitalism to the elimination of "race." It includes Betty Friedan, Mary Daly, Toni Morrison and Angela Davis (to name just few), women who often deny their shared position under the name of feminism. When we adopt approaches that seem seriously to challenge "male" "Western" values, we can assume neither that those approaches are invalid nor that they are ideal. In either case, we are measuring ourselves by Eagle's or Sheep's standard.

Yet surely that response is not enough. Duplicity may be all well and good toward one's enemies, but one's allies must be able to trust and rely on one's word, or collective action is impossible. We cannot lie to our co-conspirators without harming our cause—distrust and unreliability may be effective weapons, but they are sure to dissolve group cohesion. Nonetheless, we can use

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Coyote's duplicity to become more creative about feminist politics. For example, we may find that in an age increasingly dominated by certain Christian visions some feminists may advance our agendas by making alliances with progressive Christians and Jews. Although feminism has roots in an egalitarianism once based on Judaism and Christianity, few white academic feminists will appeal to the Christian tradition. For obvious historical reasons, this relationship is much more complex for African American feminists, yet even here the relations between Christianity and feminism remain fraught with tension (hooks and West 1991). Coyote feminism may enable us to ally with nonfeminist progressive Jews and Christians to carve out a new hegemony. This is a dangerous path, to be sure; in this new alliance, feminists may find themselves squeezed into a Christian corset. In reshaping mainstream understandings of feminism, we may produce a feminism that some feminists would repudiate. But we can't simply stop there. In such a diverse "movement," which is actually a collection of movements, the quest for the one non-exclusive position is futile. The question is not a theoretical one of how far we can go conceptually before we weaken our movement(s). It is a practical matter of whether we can hold together an alliance that might not satisfy anyone completely but offers enough to keep us coming back.

As an incentive to adopt such a strategy, I offer the fear and anxiety of the Christian right when they find that "stealth feminists" are gaining power. In many communities in the United States, Christian Coalition candidates are running on a platform of limited government, lower taxes, and crime prevention, and they are gaining seats across the country on everything from PTAs to Congress. Imagine if we adopted such a program. Running on community values, economic justice, and literacy programs, we devise a feminist future. Our opponents might say, "She's really a feminist in Christian clothing," while we keep smiling and ignoring them. This cannot be done if we insist on defending ourselves in the terms most appealing to us. If we stop to argue every time someone trashes feminism, we will lose it all. This is no longer, if it ever was, a society that fosters long conversations about ideas and perspectives. We cannot afford to wait until everyone reaches rational agreement. We have to sneak up on our audiences.

I do not mean by this that feminists should simply use religious traditions as a cover for nonreligious agendas. Many feminists are indeed nurtured in religious traditions, but in the white academy these commitments are usually muted or translated into nonreligious language. Thus it may be that many religious feminists are already acting as coyotes in academia, changing shape as they move across arenas. At the heart of Coyote politics is the knowledge that we are captured by our plans and strategies as surely as we use them. If we speak in other languages, we will indeed find ourselves in debates and coalitions that sometimes might seem incoherent or dangerous. If we don't, however, we will be pure, consistent—and marginalized. Moving "from margin to

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center" (hooks 1984) doesn't mean being assimilated, but it means engaging with hegemonic forces in an unstable and insecure environment in which co-optation is always a possibility. We can comfort ourselves best with the knowledge that co-optation need not be a one-way street.

Coyote Masculinity; or, Why Coyote Is No Prince

To this point it may seem that Coyote is simply an alternative figure to a Machiavellian power politics. Although there are certain points of agreement between Coyote and Machiavelli, their positions are actually quite distinct. Examining their differences enables us to imagine another form of masculinity, an alternative to the phallic self of Western modernity.

The first question confronting us in a comparison between Coyote and Machiavelli is what to compare. Is Coyote to be compared with the prince, or with Fortuna? The answer to this is not obvious. Coyote is presented as an actor within a world, thus inviting comparison with the prince. Indeed, the argument to this point has suggested such a comparison. But we should not be too hasty on this point. Fortuna is also an actor. Fortuna sets the conditions within which human actions occur; as Hanna Pitkin notes, "Fortune is that which is brought, and Fortuna is she who brings it" (Pitkin 1984, 138).

In many stories, Coyote is a world-builder, preparing the stage for human existence. The key difference here is that to the extent that he is a world-builder Coyote is a builder of order, whereas Fortuna works against order. Further, Coyote acts within a world in a way Fortuna does not; we have no comparable understanding of Fortuna as a person, despite its history as a goddess. Fortuna is a force of nature in a way that Coyote never can be. Coyote is a human prototype, bumbling through a world that indeed seems quite orderly.

The prince acts within Fortuna's world, acting to minimize Fortuna's effects—to establish order. While recognizing the limits of intentional action and the element of chance involved in any enterprise, Machiavelli's prince aims to read the signs that others overlook and thus to reduce the role of chance. In this the prince is the prototype of modern man, both the "man of science" and the "statesman" as well as *homo economicus*, the rational utility maximizer of economic theory. This is the antithesis of Coyote, whose role is always that of subverter and sufferer. Order may be established by some of his actions, but that is never his intent. Coyote fools himself as well as us; his grandiosity and insatiability prevent any reason, beyond the most elementary instrumental reason, from guiding his actions.

Coyote loses everything in his quest for the most and the best, and he never learns from his failure. That, indeed, is part of his charm. He would like to rule, but he always ends up being laughed at.

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Coyote offers a way to imagine a masculinity that is less phallic than the contemporary Western version. Far from the Father and His Law, Coyote is a male representation of a *jouissance* all too often reserved for women. The huge priapus mentioned in many stories is in fact anti-phallic, in that Coyote is ruled by his prick and by the quest for pleasure. Here we see not the conquest of chaos and the consolidation of identity in opposition to a dominated feminine, but rather the continually re-enacted collection and dispersal of identity. That this is a masculine representation makes it more subversive even than the evasion of identity practiced under the sign of the feminine, for this masculine loss does not simply deny the masculine as the desired position, but runs at odds to phallic masculinity itself.[7]

To see this, there is no better conceptual location than that of virtu. For Machiavelli, virtu *is* masculinity; people are masculine to the extent to which they cultivate virtu in themselves. And virtu, as Wendy Brown describes it, sums up a catalogue of masculinity that governs modern Americans as well as Renaissance citizens: virtu, she notes, "entails a struggle against man's natural self-indulgence, unfocused passions, laziness or passivity" (Brown 1988, 83). Virtu is in fact the opposite of Coyote energy; thus Coyote is not "really a man." But neither is he a woman, nor a child. As he fails to fit our pigeonholes, Coyote challenges us to see how our understandings of masculinity have constructed hard bodies out of a porous tissue.

A Coyote World

Coyote does not know all the lessons we need; indeed, Coyote's constant failures and overreachings are lessons in how not to live. Thus we need to remember that coyote politics cannot be a matter of a single set of principles that we seek to instantiate. We must search to distinguish situations where coyote approaches serve us from those in which we must remain animals with the ability to make and keep promises. This search will likely not take the shape of clear procedures or algorithms for determining when to do what. It is a matter for phronesis rather than theoria, for practical wisdom rather than theoretical reason. In this we must be smarter than Coyote, guided by more complex understandings of our situation and better able to adapt to them than he. For all of Coyote's adaptability, his motivations and perceptions are too simple and too limited to cover all situations.

Coyote can teach us, however, to question our assumptions about the virtues of virtue—the effectiveness and moral superiority of truth-telling, reliability, and stability. To assume that these are virtues or the only virtues leaves us locked in to certain choices as surely as Coyote is. We cannot assume that these virtues are always good for us. The rationale that they are required for social harmony and cohesion should lead feminists and other challengers of existing social formations to question them sharply. We have heard the same argument

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concerning the need to be respectable, nonviolent, and polite, and we have experienced the double edges of these strategies; it is not insane to examine the other social virtues thoroughly.

Coyote's bricoleur qualities serve to remind us of the value of nonspecialization. Beings with one simple strength are easy to attack. Beings with a multiplicity of weapons and defenses are much more difficult to kill. It is not Coyote's monolithic aims or weapons that make him come out on top; it is his adaptability and his blind persistence. Coyote dies, only to be remade. If there is one hair of Coyote remaining, he can be restored. If there is one feminist lurking, feminism will not die. Just when they think we're dead, Fox will find a hair.

If Coyote teaches us to use a multiplicity of weapons, living in the world he made means that we will never get it all right. As Ramsey says, believing that the world we know is the work of Coyote is "to know and accept it *on its own terms*, neither postlapsarian nor millennial: as if to say, 'Well now, the world is not perfect; how could it be, given its original artisan, our trickster ancestor—but it's pretty good, considering; good enough, anyway. It's a world: ours' " (Ramsey 1993, 36).

Coyote is not the God of the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Coyote is a bumbler, working to save his own skin even as he prepares the world for humans. (And here's a paradox: if he can be restored to life, why does he fight so hard not to lose it each time? Perhaps being reborn is tough.) In a Coyote world, we have to ask what we can expect. Dreams of ideal situations have to give way to examination of the world we have and its possible transformations. The problem with utopian thinking is not that it will not be fulfilled. The problem is that it gives us little defense against inevitable shortcoming. The exhausting history of Christian self-flagellation is based on a Platonic vision of perfection that confronts our world as error, as sin, as unforgivable. It gives us no aid in loving our world, except in grudging terms: if God made it and loves it, who are we to judge? But Christians know that this world is really a test drive through hell to see whether we belong there or not.[8] Living in such a world calls for caution, self-control, renunciation. The (covertly Christian) nihilist response is to abandon caution and renounce renunciation, not in joy but in despair. Even Nietzsche, trying so hard to move beyond good and evil, resorts to mania in order to affirm a non-Platonic world.

But Coyote doesn't need that much. Coyote is never temperate; when he is cautious he is very cautious, and when he is not he is crazy. Coyote has no learning curve.[9] Coyote is excess, both of joy and of pain. Coyote's world is beyond good and evil, although humans living in it still have need of these distinctions. The knowledge offered by the trickster is that good and evil are not etched into the nature of the world, and that reason alone is insufficient to discover them. Humans need to provide their own guidance in Coyote's world, because God doesn't live here.

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Coyote stories diverge from Euro-American modern theory most in their evocation of a world where "excessive" desire, greed, lust, arrogance, and other "vices" produce humor, where we can laugh at rather than fear these qualities, where they contribute to a full portrait of humanity not as fallen from grace but as bumbling and blessed.

In Coyote's world, process is everything. Because God will never rescue us, because this world is the only one we get, we can't defer the things that make life worth living. Coyote always starts out to do big things and then gets distracted. Some of us do the same. Others of us may start out just to go on a walk, and by the time we come home we've changed the world. In the meantime, we need to eat, to play, to commune with ourselves and one another. If we aren't doing these things, something is seriously wrong with our lives and our theories. When feminists don't play and laugh with each other, we kill our feminist futures.

Coyote politics is also different from Christian/Western politics for another reason. Despite this essay, Coyote politics is not a system or a theology. It is not, cannot be, a set of propositions neatly arrayed and compared with other sets. It is rather a mythic exemplar of a certain attitude that exceeds any one story or example of Coyote. Coyote is anti-"Western" both in the content of his stories and in his resistance to theology, and indeed to writing. I recommend not that feminists study Coyote in books and seminars, but rather that we let Coyote distract and confuse us into strength and health and power.[10]

Coyote prepared the way. How could he give us what he didn't have, or couldn't appreciate? Humans in his world need to take good care of themselves and each other. We can't count on Coyote to get rid of the poisons and dangers in the world, for he didn't know everything. We can't be just like him, for we can't be brought back to life. But we can imitate him to an extent. We can embrace the world, running and jumping and dancing and fighting and eating and fucking and bragging and crying and laughing. We can throw ourselves into the world without fear of cosmic judgment, with the knowledge that we do learn—sometimes.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of appropriation as it relates to white lesbian uses of the category of *mestiza*, see Phelan (1994, chap. 4).

2. This presumption especially works to erase lesbians of color. As the discussion between Anu, Pramilla, and Joanne (Lesbians of Colour 1991) makes clear, Euro-American dress codes and racist assumptions serve to make lesbians of color invisible.

3. Donna Shalala is Secretary of Health and Human Services in the Clinton Administration in the United States, and the subject of much speculation and gossip among U.S. gays and lesbians.

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4. See for example Ms. 4/2 (1993), with its cover story "No, Feminists *Don't* All Think Alike," featuring Gloria Steinem, bell hooks, Naomi Wolf, and Urvashi Vaid. Where are Andrea Dworkin, Mary Daly, and Sonia Johnson? Subsequent issues have continued this representation of the happy, diverse family of feminists. This may be good anti-backlash PR, but I doubt it will win over any opponents.

5. Rush Limbaugh is the host of nationally syndicated radio and TV call-in shows. He has become a major spokesperson for angry white males and has no left or liberal counterpart in the United States. Camille Paglia is an author and speaker, a self-identified lesbian who hates most women and feminists in particular. She has become a darling of the gay male press.

6. For example, see *Republic* 503c; *Theatetus* 144b; *Lesser Hippias*. At each point, Plato forces his interlocutors to deny the true wisdom, and thus the true power, of verbal and mental facility, arguing instead for a slow, patient, careful approach. Similarly, Aristophanes in the *Clouds* associates quickness and facility with the overturning of traditions and standards.

7. Coyote need not be male, however; in Beth Brant's (1988) story "Coyote Learns a New Trick," Coyote becomes a lesbian.

8. Jewish relationships to the world are more positive than Christian ones, yet still dominated by motifs of failure and loss.

9. Of course, in many stories Coyote does learn a lesson; nonetheless, I would argue that as a "communal sign in a comic narrative" (Vizenor 1993, 9) Coyote does not learn. We may learn through laughing at Coyote, but it is not his function simply to teach us a lesson.

10. Kimberly Blaeser (1993) tells a wonderful story of Trickster's meeting with "the would-be intellectuals" who capture him and try to dissect him, then allow him to reassemble himself and slip away while they become "hypnotized by their own voices." I suspect that Coyote is laughing at me now.

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